Voices of Sisters
Ministry
Religious Life



Mahdalyna Nadiya Vytvytska (left) meets with Girl Scouts at a 2020 summer camp session in Ukraine. She serves as assistant chaplain. (Courtesy of Mahdalyna Nadiya Vytvytska)



by Sr. Mahdalyna Nadiya Vytvytska

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Editor's note: *The current situation in Ukraine has stimulated interest by Catholic sisters writing about their communities and experiences in that country. Today we present the second of three columns that were submitted recently.*

Basil the Great, the Basilian Order, Basilian Sisters — these were terms completely unfamiliar to me in my youth. When the Basilian Fathers returned to our ruined and mutilated Buchach Monastery after the church emerged from "underground," I began to associate these terms with eloquent overseas missionaries who came to Ukraine, and with young men who dedicated themselves to God and wore long black dresses. In short, it was a fascinating but incomprehensible world that I just observed.

In my life I have dreamt of great love, or great noble deeds. After I graduated from law school, the Lord miraculously directed my dreams to monasticism, and it was time to choose which monastery to join. The superior of the Basilian Fathers monastery, my confessor and spiritual guide, did not recommend a specific community, but introduced me to St. Basil the Great, an aristocrat of spirit, science and holiness. I devoured book after book and my dreams did not change, but took on a specific meaning and form.

Today, after almost 22 years of monastic life in the Order of St. Basil the Great, I have not stopped thanking God for fulfilling my dreams — because I have found great love. I have had the opportunity to do many good things and lead an ascetic life, all possible in a monastic community.

Our Basilian Sisters in Ukraine have experienced prosperity, decline, persecution, destruction, reform, holiness and loss, and the theme of our 2021 meeting was "Knowledge of the past and gratitude give strength to go into the future."

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That coincided with at least four anniversaries: the 70th anniversary of the centralization of the Order, the 400th anniversary of the Yavoriv Monastery, the 100th anniversary of the service of sisters in Transcarpathia (missionary work, at that time unusual for the Order), the 200th anniversary of the restoration by

Cardinal Mykhailo Levitsky of the novitiate in Slovita after the Josephine reforms (the 18th-century reforms of Austrian emperor Joseph II that required the closure of monasteries that did not do some form of social work) and — during the third partition of Poland in 1795 — the closure of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic monasteries by the Russian tsars.

What did the Basilian sisters dream of 70, 100, 200 or even 400 years ago at crucial historical, political and cultural moments, and have our dreams changed?

When the sisters were deciding whether or not to join the Basilians in the Greek Catholic Church, they decided they were ready to take risks, were open to new ministries in the church, and began to open schools and educate girls.

After the next reform at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, the sisters answered "yes" when Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky encouraged them to leave their quiet and orderly lives in the monasteries and to go abroad to Western Europe, where there was not always enough to eat or even to feed the orphans entrusted to them. But the church and the children needed them.



Sisters who have professed temporary vows to the Basilian Sisters from the Most Holy Trinity Province meet in spring 2021. (Courtesy of Mahdalyna Nadiya Vytvytska)

Finally, in the first half of the 20th century, the desire to be one, large, international community with the Bishop of Rome as their supreme superior and leader, arose from at least three continents where the Basilians were serving

I have read and reread the history of my predecessors with admiration and pride: their lives were so close to my dreams. Their commitment and sacrifice enabled the reunion of the Basilian Sisters community in Ukraine which, according to our community data, numbers 40% of the members of our Order and is the youngest province in terms of the ages of the sisters.

What do Basilian women dream of in Ukraine today and what do they want? Today, the pandemic that has engulfed our planet has brought change to every family and every community — often disturbing or sad — but in some instances, it has provided the opportunity to stop, rethink and start afresh.

In December 2021, the Enlarged Council of the Basilian Sisters of the Province of the Holy Trinity met at the Holy Intercession Monastery in Yavoriv. Our task was to dream, based on today's historical, religious, political, economic and cultural situation. We described our dreams with the modern phrase "Strategy Development" and even invited a specialist to help us analyze our dreams, turn them into constructive planning and put them into practice.

"Love is marked by two signs: sadness and grief over what hurts the beloved, joy and diligence that he is to benefit" (St. Basil the Great, The Shorter Rule 175). He saw the task of monastic life not only in the salvation of his soul, but also in the salvation of others. When sisters think about each other and their communities, they realize that personal holiness is essential to the growth and sanctification of the whole community.



Professed Basilian sisters attend a formation meeting in spring 2021 at the monastery of Zarvanytsia, Ukraine. (Courtesy of Mahdalyna Nadiya Vytvytska)

Therefore, without an unequivocal answer as to what to do, the sisters at the Council spoke of personal growth and zeal in the spiritual life, while reflecting on the beginnings of Basilian identity. Today the world is changing so quickly in needs and challenges, and we Basilians understand that "it is harmful to the beloved" if we don't respond to them.

Are we ready for risk and radical change? We asked each other "How to rejoice with the glorified, to sympathize with the patient, when due to lack of unity no one can properly know the situation of others?" (St. Basil the Great, Greater Monastic Rules 7). And in the Basilian community, the first and most beloved neighbor is my sister with whom I am ready to take risks and overcome all the new challenges of unusual situations.

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We are united by the same values: faith, fidelity, love, unity, openness, trust, prayer, spiritual life and responsibility for our vocation, our life, our community, and our willingness to share. Living together is "a field of spiritual battle, a noble path of progress, a continual practice and constant meditation upon the commandments of the Lord. It has for its one aim and end the glory of God" (St. Basil the Great, Greater Monastic Rules 7).

We thought about what we already have, what is still missing, and what we should not insist on. In short — what to strive for, work on, study, pray for — and what to avoid, even eradicate in ourselves and our communities. We all understand that the time for change has come. Everyone wants to do great things for Christ through silent prayer or sacrificial service.

Basil told us to be "perfect in love." If we look closely, the same dreams are resonating today as in the past, because Basil the Great lives and dreams in each of us. Though it is a new time with new circumstances, it is always the same: love for God's Word, for God's people, for the desire to be perfect and be together.

This story appears in the **War in Ukraine** feature series. View the full series.